

Handout 4 - Afrofuturist Artists & Thinkers

*“It is irrational
To seek a return to past times.
Past customs,
Past struggles,
Past leaders and advisors
Should be present teachers”*

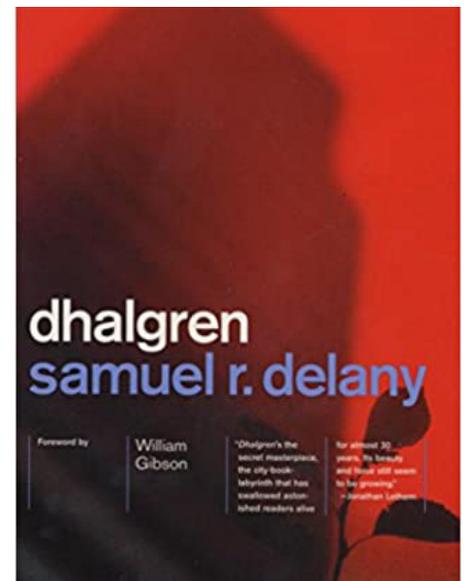
-*Parable of the Talents*, Octavia E. Butler (1998)



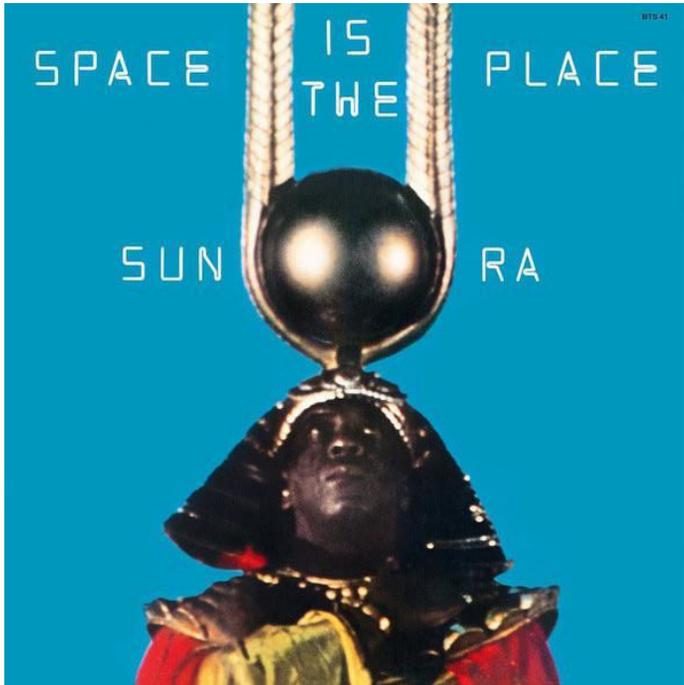
Born and raised in Pasadena, California **Octavia Estelle Butler** (1947-2006) used history, other worlds, alternative realities and carefully calculated dystopian futures to explore far-reaching issues of race, gender, power, and ultimately what it means to be human, in science fiction. Butler broke ground as a Black woman author in a genre dominated by white men. “I’m Black, I’m solitary, I’ve always been an outsider,” *The Los Angeles Times* quoted Butler as saying in 1998. Author of 17 novels and a book of short stories, Butler was the first Black woman to achieve international prominence as a science fiction writer, and the first and only writer of science fiction to earn a MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the “Genius Grant”.

“We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly.”

- “The Necessity of Tomorrows” Samuel Delany, 1978



Born in Harlem in 1942, writer, literary critic, and professor was raised and educated in New York City. Delany first rose to prominence in the mid 1960s with his experimental and genre-deviating science fiction novels and short stories including the Nebula award winning *Babel-17* (1966) and *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), and what many consider to be his master work in this genre, *Dhalgren* (1975). Delany is also well known and highly regarded for his critical writings on race, science fiction, and gender, and his memoirs. Delany has been on faculty at many institutions of higher learning, including Temple University, where he taught in the MFA program from 2001 until his retirement in 2015.



“I’m thinking about the future...which is outside of the realm of history. History has been very unkind to black people. So, actually, what I’m always talking about is the myth and nothing that has ever been is part of what I’m talking about, because I’m saying that Black folks need a mythocracy instead of a democracy. Because they’re not going to make it in anything else. They’re not going to make it in history. His story is not going to help black folks at all.”

-Sun Ra lecture during his course Black Man in the Cosmos, taught at UC Berkeley, Spring 1971

Sun Ra (1914—1993) was a pianist, composer and keyboardist who claimed the planet Saturn as his true home, though a birth certificate indicates that he was born Herman “Sonny” Blount in Birmingham, Alabama. Sun Ra felt that the future was the most important consideration for Black people. Together with his ensemble the Arkestra— part ark, part orchestra—Sun Ra recorded countless albums between 1934–1993. Sun Ra, legal name Le Sony’r Ra, was inspired by the philosophy and visual culture of Ancient Egypt and shared his unusual worldview in his concerts, a film, costumes, volumes of poetry and lectures. The above quote is excerpted from a lecture Sun Ra gave during Black Man in the Cosmos, the course he taught at UC Berkeley in 1971. Sun Ra’s application to NASA’s art program gives some indication of how he believed music functioned. In response to the applications request for specific ideas for artwork, he wrote, “Without the proper type of music your program will be more difficult than need be...Man is very anarchy minded at present.”

